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DOI:

[10.1215/02705346-3454441](https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-3454441)

Document Version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Murray, R. (2016). Raised Fists: Politics, Technology, and Embodiment in 1970s French Feminist Video Collectives. *CAMERA OBSCURA*, 31(1 (91)), 93-121. <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-3454441>

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Raised Fists: Politics, Technology and Embodiment in 1970s French Feminist Video Collectives

At the end of *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (*Maso and Miso go Boating*, Les Muses s'amuse, 1976) a floating, hand-written title credit reads: "No televisual image wants or is able to represent us. We express ourselves with video." An extraordinary example of video's capacity to disrupt and re-invent the hegemonic, bland and watered-down politics of feminism shown on television screens, *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* concludes by displaying the signatures of four women ("Carole," "Delphine," "Ioana" and "Nadja") intent on proving that only video provides the emancipatory tools their politics require. Collectively known as "Les Muses s'amuse" (Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder and Nadja Ringart), the name of the group,¹ like the title of the film, reveals an ingenious and virtually untranslatable play on words as these women search for new forms of textual and audiovisual language, at once playful, ironic and irate; a language that would always be expressed in the first-person plural.

The way that video was taken up in France in the early 1970s was clearly influenced by the aftermath of 1968, with its urge to conceive new forms of collective relations characterised by political urgency, as well as by the emergence of feminist politics that focused on the power of collective action both on the streets and in domestic spaces in the form of consciousness raising groups. It is significant that, unlike in the US context, video art did not arrive in France until the late 1970s, video being taken up principally by activist groups explicitly using video documentary as a political weapon. The history of activist video in France remains largely undocumented in

comparison to art video, despite the fact that in France, video work was overtly political from its very origins, often refusing to sit in the category of "art" but demanding, instead, screenings at meetings, in town squares, and on the street where the action was taking place.²

Directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, the Dziga Vertov Group, and Chris Marker are the most famous of the original video-makers, using it alongside film. Carole Roussopoulos, though lesser-known than her male counterparts, was the most prolific *vidéaste* of this period. Significantly, she never migrated to film but continued to work in analogue and then digital video up until her death in 2009. Throughout her career, Roussopoulos was involved in making more than 150 videos, nearly all of them documentaries, which were rarely signed with her own name, but under the names of the collectives she was part of, such as the aforementioned *Les Muses s'amuse* and the groups *Les Insoumuses* and *Vidéo Out*. While there were other video collectives operating at the time, such as *Les Cent fleurs*, *Vidéo 00*, *Slon vidéo* and the lesbian separatist collective *Vidéa*, the work of *Vidéo Out* and *Les Muses s'amuse* will be the focus of this article in terms of mapping out the connections between feminism, the proto-queer politics of 1970s France, issues surrounding race and ethnicity at the time, as well as the politics of migration and border-crossing.

Carole Roussopoulos' stated aim was to "privilege the approach of the voiceless,"³ teaching others how to use video in order to tell their own stories, and allowing her subjects the space to speak without interruption. Jean-Luc Godard wrote an open letter to Roussopoulos in 1979, published in *Cahiers du cinéma* reflecting on the way she travelled around with her "little black and white Sony [...] filming others so

frenetically," concluding that she had a tendency to "hide behind the image of the other,"⁴ to effectively efface herself. While this reads as a criticism, it fits in perfectly with Roussopoulos' declared intention to prioritise the opportunity of others to represent themselves. Of course, she never managed to completely efface herself, but there was a level of respect for her participants, and she actively involved her subjects in the process, which would not have been possible in a more auteurist approach. Evidently, the main reason for this is because she always worked as part of collective movements. Her orientation corresponds to the emphasis on participation that underpinned much of the political activity of late 1960s France, and to the emphasis on collectivity in feminist politics. There is of course a tension that emerges between identifying the role of Roussopoulos as an individual and recognising the collective nature of the work of these video groups; while I want to recognise the importance of Roussopoulos' contribution, I also note that the political impulses behind these videos always came from collective meetings, and that was why these videos covered such a broad range of issues. Indeed Roussopoulos' interest in feminist politics began when the MLF (French Women's Liberation Movement) asked her to help them edit a video, subsequently inviting her to their weekly meetings; through this venue she met Ioana Wieder and Delphine Seyrig with whom she would form *Les Muses s'amuse* and *Les Insoumuses* and establish the Parisian archive and distribution centre, Le Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir.

Early portable video provided an excellent tool for the tasks of collective activism. The Sony Portapak that Godard refers to, which arrived in France at exactly the right time (1968), was initially intended by its manufacturers to be taken up by families and tourists interested in portable technology that would allow them to capture weddings,

anniversaries and special outings on tape. 1970s Portapak marketing materials make this family emphasis clear; ironically, given its uptake by feminist collectives, many of the adverts feature young attractive models in order to demonstrate that the technology is so lightweight, low-cost and easy to operate that even a woman would be capable of using it. It was precisely for the opposite reasons that video was taken up collectively; it was cumbersome and expensive and no editing equipment was available in the early days. Rather than its capacity to preserve memory, it was the possibility of erasure that would make it so attractive to those who wanted to rewind and record over their tapes so that they would not need to keep re-stocking, as required when working with film.

A key advantage of video was its capacity for instant playback, meaning that unlike with film, video-makers did not need to process their material in order for their subjects to see what had been taped. In some cases, as we will see with *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* (*The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak Out*, Vidéo Out 1975), this immediacy enabled a sense of trust between those being filmed and the video-makers, without which the video could not have been made. Another related advantage is the relative discretion of video, which took up less space and required less equipment than film. These videos were often made outside using natural light, and video-makers could operate 30-minute continuous takes. As Fargier writes, this lent video a certain tendency for long takes, and for sequences that were "too chatty," privileging "speech that is not edited, divided or 'butchered' [...] gradually unfolding in the spirit of resentment, anger and enthusiasm."⁵ The main advantage, particularly for the feminists, was that it was a relatively new medium that had yet to be

appropriated by the mainstream media and its patriarchal structures, standing in opposition to the male-dominated cinema and television industries.

The overall issue that motivates this article is the relationship between video technology and ways of representing the body. If, as Vivian Sobchack writes, different forms of moving image technology "have not only historically *symbolised* but also historically *constituted* a radical alteration [...] of our bodily sense of existential presence to the world, to ourselves and to others,"⁶ I want to consider how such a "radical alteration" functions in the context of 1970s French feminism. The essay thus seeks to examine what forms of presence and relation emerge through activist video in 1970s France, exploring how portable video enabled the expression of a series of radical politics that refused to be confined to a TV screen. It intends to offer, through an analysis of some of these videos, a model of collective subjectivity that rests on distinctive yet interconnected modes: the queer, the nomadic, the dissident, and the performative.

1. Queer looks

It was Jean Genet who first persuaded Roussopoulos to buy the Sony Portapak camera with her redundancy payout from Vogue magazine, from which she had been fired for standing up for the rights of her co-workers. Genet, who knew Carole and her partner Paul Roussopoulos from their involvement in political movements, persuaded Carole that the Portapak was an indispensable tool that would revolutionise all forms of communication. Carole Roussopoulos had no training or interest whatsoever in film, but, accompanied by Genet, she went directly to the shop on Boulevard Sébastopol,

deposited her cheque and bought the camera, which was the second sold in France, the first having been bought by Godard.⁷ This lack of training or experience in the cinema or television industries was what would define the work of many feminist video collectives in the 1970s, giving them a completely different outlook on what the purpose of filming or taping was: not to produce a finished product but to capture fleeting moments shakily, often out-of-focus, with an urgency that put across a clear message: do not trust anything you see on television. The earliest surviving tape of Vidéo Out, Carole Roussopoulos' project with Paul Roussopoulos, is *Jean Genet parle d'Angela Davis* (*Jean Genet Speaks About Angela Davis*, 1970). This is a seven-minute tape of Genet reading out a text he had written in support of Angela Davis and the Black Panthers for a television programme to be aired on the national television channel ORTF. Genet had been invited to speak about a subject of his choosing and, fearing that the recording would be censored, he asked Roussopoulos to come along and tape the process. As the hand-written title-sequence explains, Genet's intervention was, as he had predicted, never aired. Vidéo Out's tape thus remains as a testament to video's opposition to the television. Not only does Roussopoulos capture all three of Genet's takes reading the text, but also all the bits in between, confined to a small corner with her compact camera, documenting the clapper board, the light meter reading, the sound recording equipment and even members of the team fetching Genet a glass of water and giving him advice on how to read the text. The Portapak camera seems to display a kind of shaky curiosity, at once intrepid and inquisitive, implicitly critical in its refusal to provide the viewer with a clear, stable shot, taking up a tiny fraction of the space required by the imposing and unnecessary clutter of the television team.

Genet's role in Vidéo Out's early output provides anecdotal evidence of the potential importance of a queer form of vision that sought to provide a different view of the media and ideas it engaged with. A good place to start with the question of the relationship between technology, politics and embodiment might be by looking in more detail at this proto-queer history of video. One movement that grew alongside video activism in the early 1970s, itself looking for radical new forms of expression that would break with the narrative modes of what we might now call (following the work of queer theorists such as Lee Edelman) "reproductive futurism,"⁸ was the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire. Founded by a group of students and activists, including Guy Hocquenghem and Françoise d'Eaubonne, the F.H.A.R. was a militant group that met every Thursday at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. In its early days, the F.H.A.R.'s aim was to provide an inclusive space for lesbians and gays and to organise interventions, demonstrations, and publications demanding lesbian and gay rights and exposing the homophobia and misogyny of the left-wing political movements that many of its members were involved with. These early stages were characterised by an unbounded enthusiasm and energy, which would later dissolve somewhat as splinter groups formed, and notably as lesbian separatists started getting fed up with what they perceived to be a meat market for men who had little interest in feminist politics.⁹

Vidéo Out captured the F.H.A.R. on tape in its early and optimistic incarnation, at a time when Hocquenghem was in the process of writing his seminal text *Homosexual Desire*. Roussopoulos attended one of the very first meetings at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, without her camera. Members of the group then asked her if she would be willing to tape the May 1st demonstration, the F.H.A.R.'s first intervention in a public

space. Roussopoulos taped the demonstration, and then broadcast it at the following meeting, taping, in turn, the discussion that ensued after the footage had been seen. The resulting video, *Le F.H.A.R.* (1971), edits together the discussion with scenes from the protest itself. This reflexive capacity of video was characteristic of Vidéo Out's approach, where their videos would nearly always include people talking about the video within them, creating a kind of mise-en-abyme effect. These videos were innovative in this respect, largely due to Paul Roussopoulos' *bricoleur* approach to editing, as this was before video editing equipment was available in France. Carole Roussopoulos recounts how Godard at one stage visited Paul Roussopoulos to ask him for advice on how to edit; Paul's response was simply to hand Godard a roll of sticky tape.¹⁰

In terms of a latent queer politics, of interest here are the ways in which Vidéo Out's tape seems to urge the viewer to see differently, reflecting the demands of the F.H.A.R. itself. Looking back on gay politics in his preface to Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* published in 2000, René Schérer writes of "the need for a complete rupture with all previous interpretative systems,"¹¹ specifically in relation to Freud and psychoanalytic interpretations of homosexual desire. Video too might signal a rupture in systems of interpretation, whether psychoanalytic or relating to the cinematic, that requires a rethinking of spectatorship. Here such a rethinking would need to correspond to the ideas behind the F.H.A.R.'s proposals, which highlight the social and collective politics of homosexuality. Hocquenghem's appropriation of DeleuzoGuattarian vocabulary is relevant. In the closing paragraph of *Homosexual Desire* he writes:

"Grouped homosexual desire transcends the confrontation between the individual and society by which the molar ensures its domination over the molecular. It is the slope towards transexuality [trans-sexualité] through the disappearance of objects and subjects, a slide towards the discovery that in matters of sex everything is simply communication"¹²

Hocquenghem's notion of "trans-sexualité" seems to have little to do with transsexuality or transgender politics and identity, according to which these words potentially pose a problem that highlights the well-documented tensions between transsexual and queer politics (which do not fall into the remit of this article but I have explored elsewhere).¹³ Rather, it appears as a term specific to his understanding of sexuality (rather than identity) as a slippery, non-hierarchical, or, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, rhizomatic and essentially communicative force that refuses to distinguish between subject and object, active and passive, or masculine and feminine.

How does such an idea register in relation to video? Vidéo Out's tape displays a kind of proto-queer gaze that surfaces in the spaces between gestures, bodies and words. The evocation of Saint-Exupéry in the F.H.A.R.'s collectively signed manifesto from 1971, *Rapport contre la normalité*, seems particularly appropriate. The F.H.A.R. quote Saint-Exupéry's words: "Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction."¹⁴ They write that looking together in the same direction implies one person behind the other, evoking anal sex. This looking together is also of course reminiscent of the cinema, where bodies assemble together in a darkened room to face the screen. However, video presents us with entirely different

viewing habits from the cinema, habits which might seem more compatible with Hocquenghem's model of desire as multiple, rhizomatic and molecular; most videos would be shown on small television monitors, sometimes several in one room, with people talking over the top, moving between screens, crowding round to get a better look, or wandering off halfway through the documentary. The movements of the handheld camera also reflect this, relying on its portability for the long takes, necessary due to a lack of editing equipment, and resulting in a gaze that wobbles in constant flux between bodies, changing direction unexpectedly, thus potentially creating new connections and forms of relation. The classic shot-counter-shot edit, which implies communication between two people facing each other, for example, never occurs in these activist videos; conversations flow in an altogether different direction.

Thirty-five years after this video, in Alessandro Avellis' 2006 documentary film about the F.H.A.R.,¹⁵ Roussopoulos describes how she was able to do 15-minute takes without moving from the spot where she was standing, and how she was able to tape and smoke at the same time, explaining some of the shakier moments. She states that "the F.H.A.R. was about transforming life, creating new forms of relations," commenting on the brilliance of Anne-Marie Grélois' vocabulary as she denounces the "flikatres," the "hétéroflics réformistes" and the "phallocrates" ("coppers," "reformist hetero-cops" and "phallocrats"). While Roussopoulos laments the decreased use of this vocabulary, one could say the same of Vidéo Out's video language. Fargier writes of Roussopoulos: "She jumps, plunges, immerses herself in the action, inventing a new language"¹⁶ – a language that emerges from the interaction of this relatively new technology with the body of the video-maker. He continues:

"The portable camera merges with the body of the filmmaker, increases her autonomy, reinforces her intrepidity, the ease of her movements [...] the sound camera throws itself into the action as if it were participating, the real is swallowed up in one foul swoop, and chaos flows like a river." (16)

What ensues is an instinctively anarchic, DIY aesthetics that beautifully echoes the politics of the F.H.A.R. In Vidéo Out's tape Hocquenghem speaks of the influence of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, and the notion that "we'll start with what we are and not just with our political ideas [...] starting from the gut." It goes without saying that this is a distinctly corporeal form of revolution, and the video intervention seeks in no way to present a detached, objective picture, instead drawing attention to its own presence by shifting in and out of focus, wandering around the faces in the meeting, refusing to provide factual information such as captions explaining who each participant is, or a voiceover providing a context. This marks a distinctive departure from more conventional television documentary with its headshots and captions. Roussopoulos' haphazard style truly encapsulates what is at stake in these images and in the politics they speak of, intervening in an appropriately queer way.

Recalling Fargier's assertion that video was "too chatty," it is clear that this tape is no exception. Yet the most memorable parts of the tape are non-verbal, particularly the fantastic moments of the interruption of one person's incredibly distinctive laughter, which occurs at three points in the tape, in response to someone talking about having sex in a reactionary, bourgeois way. At these points Roussopoulos' camera shakes and wobbles, zooming in on the culprit's face, capturing the laughter with a

spontaneity that joins in with this gleeful interruption. Whilst immediacy elsewhere underscores the urgency and violence of the F.H.A.R.'s proposals sparked by anger and resistance to the dominant heteronormative ideology, here it reminds us also of the humour involved. Throughout, the camera focuses intently on gestures, recalling the idea of politics as an embodied force. We see how Roussopoulos tapes faces, but often moves down to hands, with several close-ups of hands on chins, these more pensive moments intercut with scenes from the mayday march showing wild, free dancing and the camp interventions of the Gazolines. These more liberated, potentially queer movements stand in stark contrast to the rigid gestures of disapproval from judgmental onlookers in the forms of frowns, headshakes and fist shaking. The unexpected gestures of the camera, held in one raised fist, play as much a role and are almost inseparable from the bodies it displays. This taping gesture fluctuates between attention and distraction, visible onscreen in the tendency to wander around faces before returning to the speaker, always in close-up, never immobile but continually making its operator's presence felt, the gaze of the machine rippling through the room like contagious laughter.

2. Video nomadism

Portable video thus seems apt for providing a wandering, non-linear, nomadic gaze of the kind Hocquenghem, following Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalytic model, advocates for the expression of desire. This also seems to correspond in part to Michèle Le Doeuff's description of the women's movement in France, as she writes that it was not so much a coherent set of ideas but rather a "disorientation" that "lacked precise boundaries in relation to its objects and projects," at once

"polymorphous" and "scattered."¹⁷ Rosi Braidotti's analysis of feminist theory, again adapted via Deleuze and Guattari, lends her to adopt nomadism as a critical strategy. Nomadism, as she describes it, refers to a theoretical project concerned with creating a new feminist imaginary, resting on an intersectional approach that operates a fierce resistance to all forms of hegemony. She writes: "nomadism is an invitation to disidentify ourselves from the sedentary phallogocentric monologism of philosophical thinking."¹⁸ One of her key concerns is "how to reconcile partiality and discontinuity with the construction of new forms of interrelatedness and collective political projects." (26) To my mind, the most urgent question when reading these words becomes how to reconcile the sometimes difficult terrain between theory--particularly where there is a focus on anti-representative strategies--and activism, which often relies, particularly in the case of feminist video collectives (as Roussopoulos explicitly states), precisely on giving a voice to those who normally are considered unrepresentable. It is these collective forms of identity and, as Braidotti puts it "interrelatedness," that become most empowering in this context.

While taking care to distinguish the nomad from the migrant and the exile, Braidotti situates herself within her discourse as a polyglot migrant turned nomad, drawing on her Italo-Australo-Franco-Dutch identity. It is also the case that many of those involved in feminist video in 1970s were also migrants, from a variety of different backgrounds; Carole Roussopoulos "escaped" from a stifling bourgeois upbringing in Switzerland, Paul Roussopoulos was a political exile from Greece, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder had grown up together in Lebanon, Nadja Ringart was the daughter of Polish and Russian Jewish migrants, and there were many migrant women involved in the activities of the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir (Nicole Fernández-

Ferrer, its current director, is the daughter of Catalan migrants). The politics of race and ethnicity, as well as migration, were in the videos from the very beginning, from the first video with Genet's defence of the Angela Davis and the Black Panthers. Paul and Carole Roussopoulos were active in Palestinian solidarity campaigns, having visited Amman alongside Mahmoud Al Hamchari (the French leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation) during Black September of 1970-71, where King Hussein of Jordan was responsible for the expulsion and massacre of large numbers of Palestinians. The video resulting from this trip was called *Hussein, Le Néron d'Amman*. Following its screening in Paris Vidéo Out were contacted by the Black Panthers who wanted training in video equipment. Carole and Paul Roussopoulos spent a month in Algeria running workshops for the Black Panthers, alongside other liberation movements from Angola and Vietnam, sharing their knowledge of how to use video equipment.

Some of the footage of the napalm victims and refugee camps that Carole and Paul Roussopoulos shot with Mahmoud Al Hamchari and Jean Genet in Amman were later integrated into Vidéo Out's *Munich* (1972), a tape about the kidnapping of the Israeli delegation at the Munich Olympics by the Black September Organisation. Vidéo Out expose the hypocrisy of the mainstream media and of the UN's condemnation of the organisation for disrupting the Olympic peace by intercutting televised footage of these accusations with images from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and noting that the "generosity of the UN" with their Palestinian aid packages amounts to 30 cents per day and a bowl of soup. The video *L'enterrement de Mahmoud Al Hamchari* (1973) follows the Parisian burial of Al Hamchari, assassinated in 1972 by the Israeli secret services in a revenge attack for his alleged involvement in the Munich kidnappings.

Many of the videos exploring race politics focus on the difficulties within syndicalist groups in France. The video *Grève à Jeune Afrique (Strike at Jeune Afrique 1972)* deals with the worker's strike at the Parisian journal for African migrants, where Carole Roussopoulos worked as a volunteer. Participants explain how what was initially set up as an anti-imperialist journal has become depoliticised, as one worker announces: "It always tells you the exact opposite of what is really happening in Africa." The video follows the decision to end strike action, which initially started to protect workers' rights, for fear that African employees could be arrested and deported if the strike were to continue. The colour video *Flo Kennedy: Portrait d'une féministe américaine* (Les Insoumuses, 1982) is again a particularly interesting example, highlighting the differences between black feminism in the US and politics of race and ethnicity in relation to universalist discourse in France.

In terms of a nomadic video project, the most interesting videos are those that take place on the borders of France. Vidéo Out and Les Muses s'amuse made two videos in the Basque country in 1975, shortly before the death of Franco and the transition to democracy. *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye (The Women's March in Hendaye)* documents the 1975 women's protest in support of the Basque people. Feminist groups from all over France are included, as are Spanish, Catalan and Basque exiles living in France. The video includes powerful interviews with groups of women from Spain, with some speaking of how difficult it is living as a migrant in France, implicitly criticising the French value system. One interviewee, for example, declares: "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité...* I haven't found this anywhere here," before asking, "Where is home?" The groups, shown seated peacefully on the ground singing in

front of a row of uniformed, armed officers, facing the bridge that crosses to Irún, remind us of how heavily protected our arbitrary borders can be by placing these two contrasting groups in direct opposition. This is of course an issue that is no less relevant today, as migration becomes increasingly restricted for those without financial means, and particularly for those fleeing repressive political regimes. The question "where is home?" is one that continually emerges in feminist video projects, the flight from home becoming a key feminist issue, whether this is in relation to enforced exile, or an urge to escape from the stifling conditions of the home as it is controlled and defined by a patriarchal society. *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye* explores the intersection of both issues, with interviews with women bearing witness to a dual oppression, both within the home, by Spanish men, and outside, by French society at large.

The emphasis in this video is on transit, beginning with optimistic images of buses arriving full of women from all over France, laughing, talking over each other, speaking of a fun bus trip through the mountains, and ending with defiant singing reaching across a border where the groups are forcibly brought to a standstill by the border patrol. Strangely, the video cameras, of which there are many, not just Roussopoulos and Wieder's, are able to advance further than the protesting women, and other cameras are visible weaving in and out of the row of guards. The video closes with a still image of a group of women standing on a wall holding a banner that simply reads "à bas la mort" ("down with death"), shot from below, followed by a handwritten title that reads "seen and heard by Carole and Io, Hendaye 5th October 1975." These words displace responsibility for the politics expressed in the tape onto those represented within it, coming in note form (abbreviated and with no surnames)

as a brief reminder that they were there, like a form of graffiti one might see hastily sprayed onto the wall on which the women stand.

On the other side of the border, *Les Mères espagnoles* (*Spanish Mothers*, Vidéo Out and Les Muses s'amuse, 1975) combines images of protests from across Europe with footage of television reports, newspaper clippings and interviews with family members of five Basque militants: Txiki, Otaegui, Garcia Sanz, Baena and Sanchez Bravo Sollas, all murdered by the Franco regime in 1973. Using resourceful methods to disguise the identities of some of the interviewees, including a filmed interview of a plant behind which one woman speaks, the video aims to show the farcical nature of Spain's attempt to transition to democracy through the supposed opening up of the regime to a more liberal Europe. Clips from fascist Spanish newspaper columns condemn the protests with somewhat bizarre descriptions of "those porno-Europeans who come to tan themselves under Spain's glorious sun," describing anti-fascists as "sodomites" and writing of the "debauchery of a hysterical revolution." The video focuses on harrowing individual interviews with the mothers of Otaegi and Tziki where they describe their ordeals when visiting their sons hours before the executions, speaking of being strip-searched and humiliated by prison guards whilst protesting their sons' innocence in the face of unfair trials. This stands in stark contrast to *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye* which presents a freer, empowering picture, full of laughter, chanting and singing.

The two tapes nonetheless speak very clearly to each other, and were often screened together. The closing words of *Les Mères espagnoles* come from Tziki's mother, directly addressing the camera, attesting to the difficulty of taking action in Spain and

pleading with activists across Europe to continue to fight for justice on their behalf. Unlike some of the women on the other side of the border in *La Marche des femmes à Hendaye*, these mothers are not exiles. Nor are they able to enact any form of nomadism, as the words of Tziki's mother's highlight: "To all the women who marched throughout Europe in support of the 5 men who were killed, I thank them for what they are doing. I ask them to continue so we can make some progress because they won't let us do anything here in the Basque country. I ask these women to let the world know what happened. These words come from a mother who has lost her son." Addressing the camera directly, and speaking loudly with an urgent tone, this comes as a direct appeal. Immediately following these words, Tziki's mother turns her head slightly to the side and says "let's see, what else?" just before the video abruptly cuts out, the end of the tape signalling an interruption. This unexpected, sudden ending has a strange effect, jolting the viewer from complete absorption in a powerful emotional appeal into suddenly becoming aware of her/his surroundings; there is no fadeout, freeze-frame, credits or handwritten explanation (as with *La Marche des femmes*), or any indication that the tape is about to end. The editing throughout is once again haphazard and rough, frequently cutting off mid-sentence, reminding us that the purpose is not to produce a finished product or document but to inspire others to act, the focus being on immediacy: a call to direct action.

If a theoretical nomadic project such as Braidotti's shifts the focus from enforced displacement and exile to a more empowering form of this displacement - one in which, unlike the exile, the nomad has the freedom to explore the thresholds or borders between different states or modes of subjectivity, without of course necessarily enjoying the privilege of having a fixed location to call "home" - this has

little to do with the experience of the mothers themselves. Here, then, it is video that operates a nomadic trajectory, not the women it represents, who have been forcibly denied a home through the repression of their identity as well as the murder of their sons. Tziki's mothers' words emphasise that nobody else is representing these women; the only way in which their words can be heard, and action can be taken on their behalf, is through video, operating its unique form of nomadism on its subjects' behalf. To return once again to the question "where is home?" this might also then become relevant to the role of film and video and the way in which each medium works to construct memory differently. Where cinema is able to "host" its audience, this is within the kinds of institutions that 1970s French video often explicitly opposed. Whilst Isabelle McNeill writes, with reference to the films of Yamina Benguigui, about the possibility of film as "a virtual space that creates a sense of 'home'," ¹⁹ Laura Marks has written that "video has always been a homeless medium." ²⁰ This "homelessness" becomes all the more urgent in relation to feminist politics; I want to argue that rather than denying a home through its nomadic trajectories, 1970s French video in contrast provides a home for particular kinds of political demands, whilst actively destabilising the foundations on which such a "home" could establish itself as an institution, within a patriarchal, capitalist society: the focus is on home as a non-hierarchical community space in constant flux which guarantees neither the privilege or the stability of institutional support or even long-term preservation.

The history of the distribution of these tapes also points towards video as a process that defies fixity and denies the limits imposed upon film. Both tapes were distributed by individuals, smuggled between different countries and shown to activist groups.

Anne-Marie Duguet estimates that they were shown approximately 2,000 times in the four months following the events they depict, although she does not say where this figure comes from.²¹ In fact it is extremely difficult to track the distribution of activist video, as tapes were continually being copied. One of the favourite methods of distribution for 1970s video collectives was "wheelbarrow distribution," consisting of video monitors in car boots, set up on the street using electricity from sympathetic shop or bar owners.²² Video does not require, as officially distributed film does in France, a visa to be shown (the "visa d'exploitation"). Video collectives were on the whole suspicious of any attempt to document or track their distribution, particularly when the *dépôt légal* came into force in 1977.²³ Later on, in 1981, the collectively-managed distribution centre *Mon Oeil* (My Eye) was set up in Paris with the aim to preserve some of the videos no longer in circulation, as well as to promote new work. Working with similar intentions, Seyrig, Roussopoulos and Wieder set up the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in 1982, but few distribution records were kept in the 1970s, the emphasis being more concretely on going out into the streets to get people involved. What becomes particularly apparent with the Basque tapes is that the imaginative and nomadic distribution process enables the expression of many of the politics of which the women speak, allowing for dissident identities to assert their right to exist, as well as questioning the overarching narratives attached to national identity and undermining the enforced boundaries and definitions of states and subjects, calling their declared impermeability into question.

3. Sexual dissidence and video performance

A different threshold is in operation in the videos exploring the sex workers' struggle in 1970s France. Vidéo Out's 1975 video *Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent* (*The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak Out*) is ground-breaking in its intimate portrayal of sex workers defining their struggle under their own terms. The threshold at work here is this time between the inside and outside of the Saint-Nizier church in Lyon. The tape depicts a group of sex workers, who were representing 200 women in Lyon, occupying the church, demanding an end to arbitrary arrests and fines on prostitutes, and greater freedom and respect from the police. This video sets itself apart from much of the feminist discourse in France at the time, and from videos such as Vidéa's *Kate Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* (*Kate Millett Speaks About Prostitution with some Feminists*, Vidéa, 1975), because while feminists across the country were fiercely debating the prostitution issue, it seemed that prostitutes and sex workers were often left out of the debate, as if sex work and feminism were mutually exclusive.²⁴

Les Prostituées de Lyon parlent, as the title suggests, it is entirely focused on the testimonies given in the church by women directly affected by the issues raised. Carole Roussopoulos, who was inspired by reading Millet's *The Prostitution Papers* (a present from Genet) points out that this tape was only possible due to the technology afforded by portable video.²⁵ The striking sex workers were extremely suspicious of Vidéo Out when they arrived at the church, and only agreed to participate because they were able to determine what would be broadcast by virtue of video's capacity for instant playback. This of course would not have been possible with film, which would require several days to be processed by a lab before the footage could be seen. Had the video not been there, the women would have relied on handwritten posters to

communicate their message to passers-by on the street as they themselves were unable to leave the church for fear of being arrested; video offered the perfect medium for getting their message across. Vidéo Out were able, with their Portapak, to record inside during the mornings, decide with the sex workers what they wanted to communicate, and broadcast the recorded interviews outside the church in the afternoons. This process went on for a week. In turn, they taped the crowds that gathered to watch the small television screens that they had cunningly embedded in the gaps in the thick stonewalls of the church. The resulting document, like so many of the 1970s videos, is a mise-en-abyme, where the video within the video becomes an agent in political activism itself, shaping the struggle in as much as it is able to mediate between two very different groups, separated by the impenetrable walls of one of the world's most long-standing repressive institutions: the Catholic church. Video's penetration of this seemingly immutable boundary of course only reflects the far more radical penetration by the sex workers themselves demonstrating for their rights, but it seems to do more than affirm their presence and enable the communication of their demands; in fact, it questions the very structures of representation through which these words are usually heard (or ignored), including a fundamental questioning of its own presence within and against those structures. In this sense, we might say that video self-consciously performs its own function.

This "performative" capacity of video is also brought into question by those videos that reach beyond the boundaries of documentary, such as Seyrig and Roussopoulos' interpretation of Valerie Solanas' *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*. In this video Seyrig dictates extracts from the manifesto, word for word including punctuation, while Roussopoulos types it out, taking a break from time to time by cranking up the TV

behind them which displays news reports speaking of violence and atrocities across the globe, from aerial bombings in Lebanon, to assassinations in Buenos Aires, from reports about the nuclear arms race, to more positive images of the 1976 People's Peace March in Ireland which was instigated by a group of women. The video was undertaken when the French version of Solanas' manifesto was out of print, its reproduction performed as a gesture to recuperate feminist histories whilst drawing attention to their continual erasure.

Another example can be found in *Il n'y a qu'à pas baiser! (Just don't fuck! Vidéo Out, 1973)* which documents the MLF's fight for abortion and reproductive choice and includes within it video footage of an illegal abortion being carried out, using the Karman Method, in someone's living room. Once again this was a transgression of the threshold between public and private space which would have been unthinkable on television simply because it was illegal and potentially dangerous for all of those involved. The tape opens with a long sequence from a program on ORTF debating abortion, only to reveal that we are watching television, and to include in the shot the tape winding round the reels of the Portapak recorder as it captures what is being seen. Right from the start, the viewer is made aware not only of video's presence, but also of how that video is operating, feeding off the television set in order to scramble its message as it spews it out in distorted form.

A similar technique occurs in *Maso et miso vont en bateau*, a video that uses many more complex strategies. This was ingenious in terms of its experimentation with video editing and the title playfully refers to Jacques Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau (Céline and Julie Go Boating, 1974)*, a film in which the protagonists discover

that they can intervene in the plot, altering dialogue and inserting alternative actions into the film as it goes along. *Maso et miso* is a thorough re-working of Bernard Pivot's rather less radical programme "Encore un jour et l'année de la femme – ouf! – c'est fini!" ("Just one more day to go and the Year of the Woman – oof! – is over!"), with its invited guest Françoise Giroud, the French spokeswoman for the UN's International Woman's Year, 1975. The original television programme alone, an ill-conceived anti-feminist jibe, was of course perfectly capable of illustrating the absurdity of an international women's year, but from an entirely chauvinist perspective. For Seyrig, Wieder, Ringart and Roussopoulos, it provided the perfect opportunity for a playful experimentation with video's creative form of piracy. The video replays and interrupts the original programme at every available opportunity, each time one of the participants in the discussion says something obtuse, seemingly almost every sentence uttered. There are also points at which images from other sources are inserted, for example video footage of the section of the 1975 8th March feminist march protesting against the Year of the Woman, and footage of a rare television interview with Simone de Beauvoir about the extreme sexist reactions that the publication of *The Second Sex* provoked.

Unfolding like a video machine gone haywire, with sudden interjections in the form of incredulous exclamations, parodic written surveys, chanting, rewinding and replaying in order to create a scat-like rhythmic repetition that serves to highlight the idiocy of some of the declarations being made, the video continually draws its own mechanisms into the limelight. In fact, it constantly reminds us that all the action in this reinterpretation is taking place off-screen, in a space outside the television studio that nonetheless has the capacity to incessantly disrupt this inaccessible domain. At

one point the video cuts to a shot of the four women singing, in a parody of Giroud's own words, "everything is fine Madame Minister, everything is fine" in front of the television monitor in the video editing suite, with all of the video equipment on display.

Duguet writes that this may have been the most widely circulated video, estimating that it was seen by 300,000 spectators by the end of 1980, being broadcast in a variety of different public and private spaces. Even if these figures are hard to prove, given, as we saw with the Basque films, the lack of concrete data, the reaction of the television company and of Françoise Giroud herself is a testament to the power of this video, made with the most minimal of means. Roussopoulos recounts how Giroud was mortified and got in touch with them to ask them to stop circulating the tape. The Parisian cinema L'Olympic Entrepôt screened the video for a several weeks, but it eventually had to suspend screenings after pressure from Antenne 2, the television channel responsible for the original program. The response from *Les Muses s'amuse* to this pressure was to declare that they would indeed stop distributing it, but only once it had been screened on TV, which, of course, it never was. Nonetheless, this video reached, as Duguet writes, an impressively large audience.

Video becomes an appropriate medium for exploring subjectivity, sexuality and gender as performative and mobile, rather than grounded in immutable essence when it performs skewed modes of rhythm, feedback and reproduction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Maso et Miso*, in which, as Duguet argues, *Les Muses s'amuse* "rupture the 'natural flow' of speech, slicing into the very material of its expression, utterly demolishing this."²⁶ Whilst *S.C.U.M.* also explores unruly rhythms

and modes of unproductivity or "unwork," as Laura Guy argues,²⁷ here it is rendered explicit in an unparalleled manner, exposing feminist activity as disruptive through the very forms of interruption, rewinding, repetition and insertion offered by video technology.

Conclusion

These videos' strength emerges at the moment where they explore the vulnerability of the image, thereby questioning, challenging and disrupting the immutable, all-powerful structures of mainstream media representation. This might be thought of in terms of the image that video produces, which deteriorates rapidly over time.

Videotape images are fleeting, fragile, subject to all kinds of distortions, from static contamination to magnetic erasure. Some theorists even go as far as to suggest that there is no image in video, because it is an electronic medium made up of scanning lines in continual movement, unlike film which is made up of a series of stills put into sequence to create the illusion of movement. Nam June Paik points out in an interview with *Cahiers du cinéma* from 1979 that when Jean-Luc Godard speaks of truth 24 times a second, this is only true for film. Paik argues that with video there is no truth at all, and no image as such to speak of.²⁸ Yet this is more greatly evidenced in the case of video art. How might such a statement relate to activist documentary, which posits a certain sense of authenticity whilst paradoxically disregarding any claim to "truth" as representable on a television monitor? And how might it relate more specifically to the context of 1970s French feminist activism?

French feminism developed post May-1968, and these videos emerged amongst the activism and critical theory that was proliferating in the universities and on the streets. As an atmosphere of dissent was permeating French society at all levels, these videos, following the publication of texts such as Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the work of the Situationists, produced work which was very much about finding new ways of seeing that explicitly criticised any notion of truth. Feminist video collectives were not so interested in theorising or tapping into this dissent as they were in expressing it in their own terms, finding their own space both within and against it, and searching for new forms through which to speak to other activists and women. Many of these videos seem to be about disrupting boundaries, thresholds and borders in different ways, whether these are between the home and the streets, the public and the private, or between different countries; this is because they came from a specifically feminist urge for women to seek out their own space, a search which coincided with the discovery of what was essentially, and so importantly for them, a new form of representation. Consequently, these videos defy easy categorisation, explicitly refusing to fall into the category of art, but also refusing "avant-garde," "realist" or "cinéma vérité" labels. These women were searching altogether different modes of expression, modes that were necessarily, rather than simply self-consciously, experimental, because as is clearly visible in the videos themselves, they were learning as they were going along.

The politics of Vidéo Out, Les Insoumuses and Les Muses S'amuse operate in both a direct and a subtle mode, emerging, much like the video image, between the lines. These videos do not say "television is lying, here's the truth." They seem to put everything, including themselves, into question, while presenting us with the images

and words of disobedient, critical women who are elsewhere ignored. By questioning their own means these collectives are not only participating, but also actively showing *how* they participate, in each political movement they deal with. This highlights direct action over any claim to truth, the video equipment working together with the bodies depicted rather than representing them from a distance or simply producing a document. It does this work by drawing attention to the body through the kinds of gestures it performs, which are rarely fixed, as the video camera and recorder becomes itself a body among others; on its most explicit level, the camera never seems to be simply taping during a protest, but is always also protesting itself.

This is a mode of representation that initially in the French context distinguished itself from film and from conventional documentary as well as from artist video, providing divergent forms of temporality. Debates about feminist forms of representation in the 1970s English-language academic context largely centred on the disruption of form inherent in avant-garde feminist film, with virtually no emphasis on documentary.²⁹ These videos, however, occupy a shifting terrain between documentary, on the one hand, and experimentation, on the other. Where they display an insistent materiality that is self-reflexive and spontaneous, reminding us of the interventions of their participants as both reflexive and spontaneous, this is out of necessity rather than aesthetic choice. This is the very necessity that led feminist communities emerging around groups such as the F.H.A.R and the MLF to take up video rather than film as a medium that was best suited the exploration of a politics that came from the gut, to recall Hoquenghem's words. This curiously DIY experimentation provides affirmation that collective, spontaneous and chaotic forms of protest could, at the time, be displayed in no other way; the question remains for contemporary viewers as

to how ever-evolving current forms of video activism might re-enact, incorporate or build upon the radical, collective representations of subjectivity displayed in this work.

With thanks to Laura Guy, Syma Tariq, Nicole Fernández Ferrer and the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir.

This research was supported by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust.

Stills from *Y'a qu'a pas baiser*:

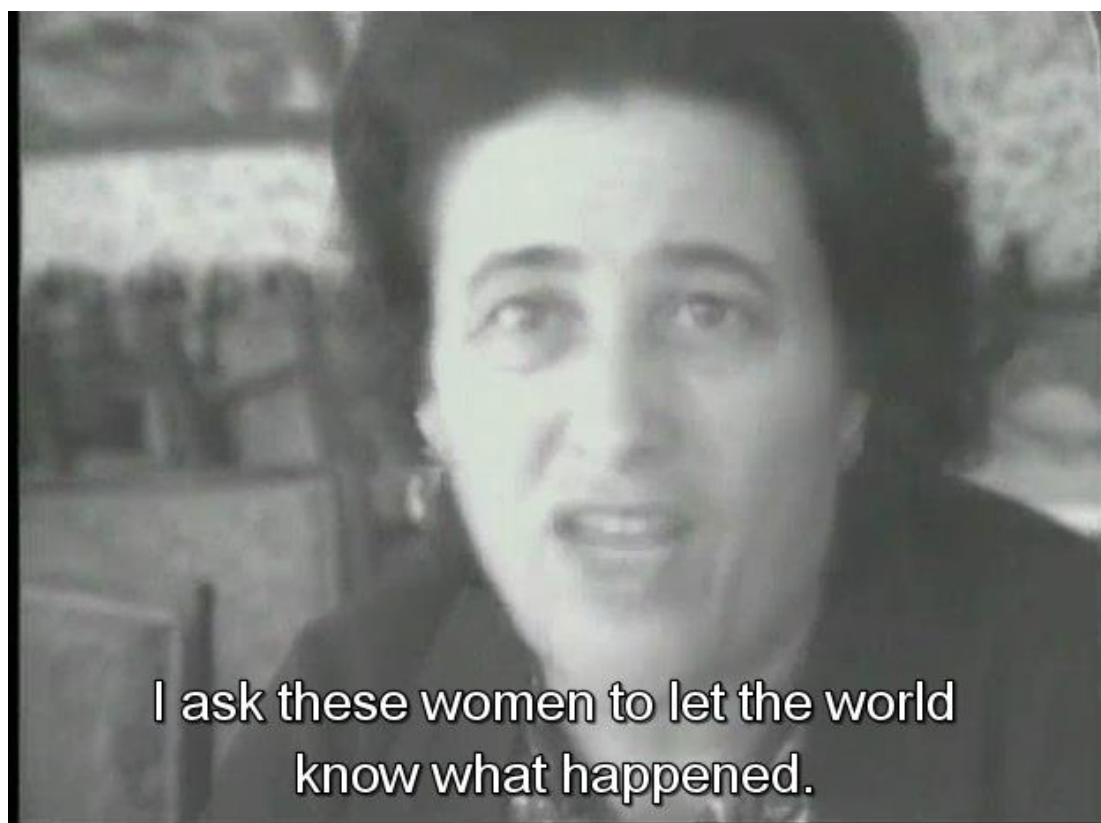




La Marche des femmes à Hendaye:

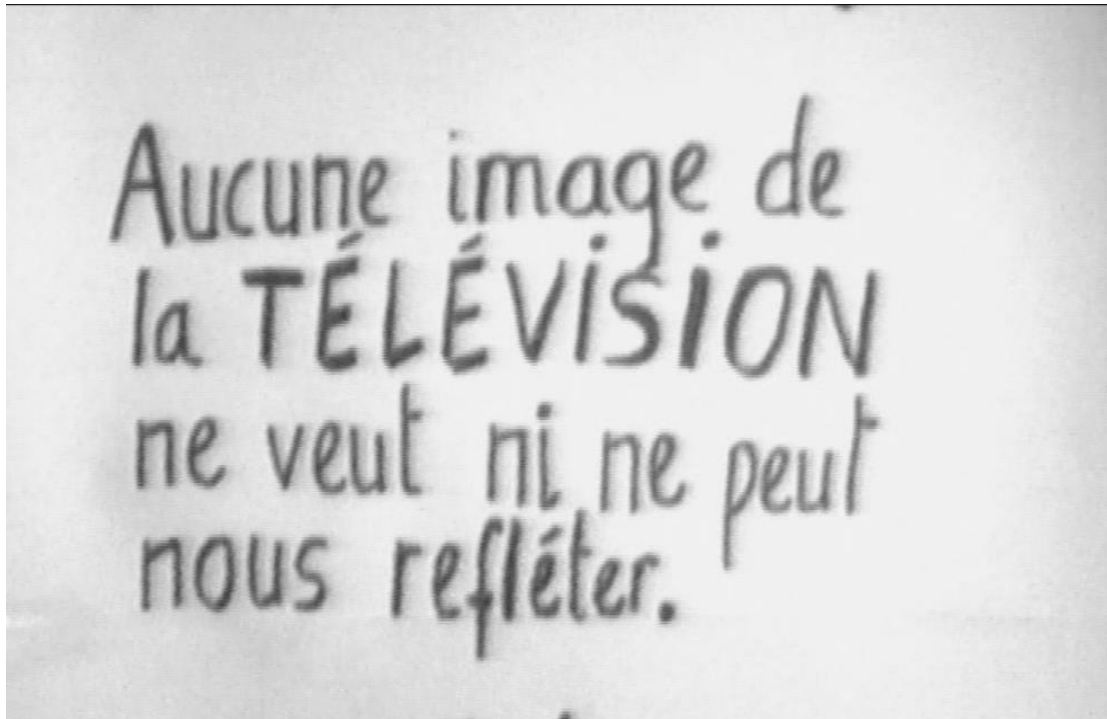


Les Mères espagnoles:



Maso et Miso vont en bateau:





¹ This is a reworking of Seyrig, Wieder and Roussopoulos' collective, *Les Insoumuses*, a distortion of "insoumises" and "muses". "Insoumises" translates as insubordinate, but also refers in the French context to a group of Second Empire courtesans who refused to adhere to traditional moral codes. Since the 1970s the term "insoumises" has taken up by a variety of radical feminist groups seeking to transgress norms and challenge authority. "Les muses s'amuse" translates as "the muses are having fun."

² There are a few notable exceptions to this tendency to overlook activist video; see Anne-Marie Duguet, *Vidéo: la mémoire au poing* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), Stéphanie Jeanjean, "Disobedient Video in France in the 1970s: Video Production by Women's Collectives," *Afterall* issue 27, Summer 2011, and the doctoral work of Hélène Fleckinger.

³ Brenez et al, *Caméra Militante: Luttés de libération des années 1970* (Geneva: Metis Presses, 2010), p. 8.

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- ⁴ Jean-Luc Godard, "Vingt ans après" in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 300, May 1979, p. 30.
- ⁵ Jean-Paul Fargier, "Histoire de la vidéo française: Structures et forces vives" in *La vidéo entre art et communication*, ed. Nathalie Magnan (Paris: ENS, 1997), p. 51.
- ⁶ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), p. 136.
- ⁷ Roussopoulos, interview with Hélène Fleckinger in Brenez et al, *Caméra Militante*, p. 99.
- ⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- ⁹ For a more detailed account of lesbian separatism and Le F.H.A.R., see Marie-Josèphe Bonnet, *Adieu les rebelles!* (Paris, Flammarion 2014), p. 35.
- ¹⁰ Roussopoulos interview with Hélène Fleckinger, *Caméra Militante*, p. 103
- ¹¹ Preface to Guy Hocquenghem's, *Le Désir homosexuel* (Paris Fayard, 2000), p. 12
- ¹² Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* trans. Daniella Dangoor (Allison & Bushby, London: 1978), p. 136
- ¹³ Ros Murray, "Activism, Affect, Identification: Trans Documentary in France and Spain and its Reception" in *Studies in European Cinema*, vol 11, no. 3, pp 170-180.
- ¹⁴ Saint-Exupéry, from his autobiography *Wind, Sand and Stars*, quoted in Le F.H.A.R., *Rapport contre la normalité* (Paris: Bibliothèque GayKitchCamp, 2013), p. 70.
- ¹⁵ *La Révolution du désir* dir. Alessandro Avellis, France 2006
- ¹⁶ Jean-Paul Fargier, "La vidéo militant contre la télévision", in Brenez et al., *Caméra Militante*, p. 16.
- ¹⁷ Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 223.
- ¹⁸ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 24

¹⁹ Isabelle McNeill, "Virtual Homes: Space and Memory in the Work of Yamina Benguigui" in *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 51, no. 1, Spring 2011, p. 13.

²⁰ Laura Marks, "What is That *and* Between Arab Women and Video?" in *Camera Obscura* 54, vol 18, no 3, p. 43.

²¹ See Duguet, *Vidéo: La Mémoire au poing*, p. 56.

²² Stéphanie Jeanjean, "Disobedient video in France in the 1970s," p. 14.

²³ This is the legal requirement to submit a copy of any film made in France to a repository. It was not immediately clear how this applied to video; but once videos were screened at cinemas in France they were obliged to adhere to its regulations, although most video groups simply ignored them.

²⁴ Vidéa's tape *Kate Millett parle de la prostitution avec des féministes* provides a fascinating overview, like *Flo Kennedy*, of some of the differences and similarities in US-based and French-based feminism. Taking place in a tiny and cramped bookshop, the video visibly struggling for space, and depicting heads popping through shelves between the books to catch Millett, Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig's words, it is in itself a remarkable document, but one cannot help but notice the distinct absence of the voices of those directly affected by the issues these women discuss, which is particularly surprising given that the discussion emerges from a sex workers' protest that was taking place in France at the same time.

²⁵ From an unpublished interview with Pauline Boudry and Carole Roussopoulos, with thanks to Pauline Boudry.

²⁶ Anne-Marie Duguet, *Vidéo: La mémoire au poing*, p. 74.

²⁷ Laura Guy, *Becoming a Subject of History: Rereading Manifesto Forms as Feminist Practice*, Manchester Metropolitan University, thesis due for completion in 2015.

²⁸ Interview with Nam June Paik by J-P Cassagnac, J-P Fargier et S. Van der Stegen, in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 299, Avril 1979, pp 10-18.

²⁹ See Alexandra Juhasz, "'They said we were trying to show reality – all I want is to show my video': The politics of the realist feminist documentary" *Screen* 35:2, summer 1994, p. 183.